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LITHUANIANS

By Thomas Shamis

Lithuania, having a loyal character, must be preserved, for her tongue possesses the key which opens all the enigmas not only of philology, but also of history.—Preface to *Grammatik der Litauischen Sprache*, by Emmanuel Kant, Königsberg, 1800.

Lithuania was once a world power. Its boundaries extended from the Baltic to the Black sea. Besides Lithuania proper, within its confines were the provinces of Vitebsk, Polotsk, Smolensk, Kiev, Lutsch, Chernogov.

Lithuania, like many another nation, fell prey to political tricksters and in 1772 was finally divided between Russia and Prussia. But Lithuanian patriotism survived; and the period immediately following the partition was a trying one for Lithuanians. They were oppressed and killed for their love of the Lithuanian language, and of their native rights and customs. But the scaffold, the prison and the Siberian exile were of no avail to make the Lithuanian give up what was so dear, the Lithuanian language.

Lithuania is situated on the Eastern shore of the Baltic sea, and forms an oblong, being 300 miles long and 200 miles wide. The date when the Lithuanians first settled in their native country is not known exactly, but from ancient times the Lithuanians occupied the swamps and level lands covered with endless forests extending from the Baltic sea to the East and South. In Bain's *Slavonic Europe* we read:

Lithuanians first emerged into the light of history at the time of the settlement of the Teutonic Order in the North. Rumors of the war of extermination, waged by the Knights against their near kinsfolk, the Prussians, first evoked the Lithuanians to a sense of their danger. They immediately abandoned their loose communal system for a monarchical form of government, and under a series of exceptionally capable Princes, notably, Mindovg (1240–1263), and Gedymin (1316–1341), began an astonishing career of conquest, mainly at the expense of Russia, so that at the death of Gedymin, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania extended from Courland to the Carpathians, and from the Bug to the Deans,

including the old Russian principalities of Plock, Kiev and Chernigov. Indeed, at one time, it seemed as if this new, non-Slavonic State was about to eclipse and absorb all the Slavonic states to the East and West.

The Lithuanian language, as many prominent linguists prove, is most beautiful, and older than the Greek or Latin. Anthropology has shown that the Lithuanian language differs from the language of the Slav, as has been heretofore believed, but belongs to the Indo-European group and is nearer the Sanskrit than any other language. Since anthropology has revealed the fact that the Lithuanian language is older than the Greek, Latin and German, the Lithuanians can truly say that without doubt theirs is the oldest language spoken today.

The Contemporary Review, of August, 1917, writes:

Harmonious, richer in affectionate and cajoling diminutives than any other of the languages of Europe, Lithuanian possesses the sonority of Latin and Greek; the primitive qualities of Sanskrit; and the softness and musicality of Italian. So well have some of the primitive characteristics of this beautiful language been preserved in the undisturbed backwaters of Lithuania, that, if it were possible for the Romans and the Greeks to rise from their graves, they would have little difficulty in understanding whole sentences as spoken by the Lithuanian today, whilst these could just as easily understand some of the phrases of the Sanskrit.

"Vyrai, traukite jungan," uttered the Lithuanian refugee sadly, as he shouldered his pack and fled before the German invader (1915). "Viri trahite jugum"—"Men, drag the yoke"—echoed the Roman. "Dzievs (Dievs) dave dantis, duos ir duonos"—"God has given us teeth, he will give us bread"—continued the refugee resignedly, though his farm was in flames and all hope of return to his ravaged fields seemed gone forever. And from ancient Greece came the encouraging response: "Dzeus doe odontas dosei sitos."

It is undeniable that Lithuanian is the most ancient of all the living languages, and as such is of invaluable service to philology. This opinion was confirmed scientifically by Schleicher, who showed, by his work on the Lithuanian language, its great value to philology. And the work of Elisee Reclus testifies to its striking beauty:

Of all European languages, the Lithuanian has the greatest number of endearing and caressing diminutives. It has more of

them than Spanish or Italian, and even more than Russian, and they can be multiplied almost indefinitely by applying them to verbs and adverbs, as well as to adjectives and nouns. If the value of a nation in the whole of humanity were to be measured by the beauty of its language, the Lithuanians should rank first among the inhabitants of Europe.

Lithuanians in early days were noted for their production of amber, precious stones and other minerals. They traded chiefly with the Greeks and the Romans. Greek historians wrote about the second century that the Lithuanians were a quiet race of people and never fought unless attacked. Tischler and other archeologists write of the highly developed Lithuanian culture.

From the beginning of the thirteenth century Lithuania started her historical life. Until that century the Lithuanians lived in clans in their forests; when the Germans, discovering a new field for their commerce, prompted the Lithuanians by their spirit of independence to gather around their chiefs and to select a single head chief. The first to be selected was Rimgaudas who had gained several victories over the Mongolians, and stopped their march on Occidental Europe. Later he established his dominion over the Russians. He extended the boundaries of Lithuania as far as Polotsk and Vitebsk.

Mindaugis, who succeeded Rimgaudas, had to fight against the Russians, the Poles and the Teutonic Knights: The Knights of the Cross and the Knights of the Sword. The *Dublin University Magazine*, November, 1869, writes:

The Knights felt that if Lithuania was Christian, there would be no more "pagan hordes" for them to make head against, and so they were not at all anxious that the pure faith should make way across the Niemen. They were always ready, however, to foment disorders in the country.

In 1260 at the battle of Lake Durbes, Mindaugis inflicted a crushing defeat upon the Teutonic Knights. In 1263 he was assassinated. His sons taking revenge upon the murderers of their father brought Lithuania into anarchy which lasted nearly a score of years, until Vitenas finally brought order out of chaos.

Gediminas, Vitenas' younger brother, head of the Jagellon dynasty, was the founder of Lithuania's power. The Russians feared him and withdrew leaving Volhynia and he advanced as far as Kiev. About this time the Mongolians threatened to ruin the Western civilization. Lithuania at her height formed an obstacle which opposed the invasion, and the Lithuanians saved Europe from this disaster.

Gediminas realizing that Lithuania could not stand alone formed alliances with various nations in Europe, and ruled the country in an orderly manner. He even made arrangements with the Pope to establish Christianity in Lithuania, but the Germans with their Teutonic Knights succeeded in preventing this. A few friars were allowed to preach the gospel in Lithuania. F. Boldt in his review tells of the character of the Knights in the following words:

The Teutonic Knights were slowly preparing to annex Lithuania; they did not hurry themselves, for they liked to keep, as long as possible, a miniature crusading ground, where all the enthusiasts of Europe might carry on the war against the infidels, with a minimum of danger and a maximum of profit.

Gediminas' two sons, Algirdas and Keistutis, ruled together. This was a period of war for the Lithuanians. Algirdas, who fought the Russians forced them to give up much of their land and marched three times up to Moscow, and his gallant army invaded Crimea. When he died he left Lithuania with her dominions extending from the Baltic to the Black sea, and from the Bug to the Donetz. Keistutis was at the same time fiercely fighting with the Germans, who wished to conquer Lithuania. Keistutis' gentle character is ably told in the following which appeared in *Dublin University Magazine*, November, 1869:

Keystutt, was a prince in an age when, according to the German Minnesingers, the Christian Knights were losing all title to the name, yea, were spoiling the trade of the Jew usurers. Often taken prisoner by the Teutonic Knights, he usually owed his escape to the admiration which he inspired in his gaolers. Once, after eight months captivity he got away in the dress of the order, the well known white cloak with black cross, and on the horse of the Grand Master himself; but he took care to send back the horse

as soon as he crossed the frontier. He was as magnanimous in victory, as he was intrepid in defeat. Here is an instance of this crude heathen's conduct:

Johannisburg has just been taken by a night attack; the "white cloaks" have surrendered; they are packed in the courtyard of the castle while round them streams a crowd of people clad in sheepskins, brandishing their bows and arrows, and calling for vengeance and for wholesale sacrifice to Zinicz (the sanctuary of the highest God, Perun). Although the commander of the Knights steps forward, "Son of Gedimin," he says, "I am ready to die, but spare my comrades!" "Chose the four of them, whom you love best, and ride freely off; as for the rest, they shall all have their lives; Keystutt hath said it."

He always duly warned the Grand Master before he made any inroads on the Knights; and, when he said he was coming, he always came.

Jagello, the son of Algirdas, by his marriage with Hedwig, the Queen of Poland, united Lithuania with Poland on a dynastic union; the Poles, basing their claims on this mere bond exacted a prepondering power in Lithuania. Jagello was compelled to leave the Grand Ducal throne to his cousin, Vytautas, who did all he could to keep the independence of Lithuania, which at that time was three times larger than Poland. He attempted to Christianize the country and had a measure of success; the Lithuanians were baptized and thus were the last of the present Christian nations of Europe to become converted. Polish missionaries then began to travel through Lithuania and preach, but they made an unforgiveable mistake in disregarding the language (*lingua vernacula*) of the Lithuanians and in forcing the Polish language upon them. As a result of this Christianity did not obtain a strong foothold in Lithuania, so that still in the seventeenth century more than half of the Lithuanians were pagans. After this union with Poland, Lithuania retained its own power, princes and government, so that all that remained in common to the two nations was the union between them. Vytautas seeing the Teutonic Knights threatening to crush all in their way, gathered his forces, being aided by the Poles and Russians, and dealt the Knights a decisive blow which ended in a complete victory at Grunvald (1410). Unfortunately, however, Poland did not remain loyal and when in 1447 Casimer Jagello was

crowned King of Poland, disputes arose as to whether Lithuania should be considered a kingdom as it was before the union with Poland, or merely as a province of Poland. In order to settle this matter, conventions were held at Lublin and other places, in 1448, 1451, 1453, which ended in bloody riots between the Poles and Lithuanians. According to Lithuanian chronicles, the Lithuanians became so exasperated at the intrigues of the Poles that they wished to return the marks of heraldry bestowed upon them by the Poles. The Kingdom of Lithuania thus remained legally in the same condition in which it existed before the union. The situation is explained in Bain's *Slavonic Europe*:

In Poland itself, men were of one mind as to the desirability of a complete and absolute union; but the Lithuanian magnates obstinately opposed it. Only the fear of the Moscovite with whom they were always more or less at war, induced the Lithuanians to entertain the proposal at all. The project of a closer union was first debated at the Diet of Warsaw (November, 1563; June, 1564), to which the Lithuanians sent delegates. The discussions were warm on both sides and ultimately came to nothing; but the King judiciously prepared the way for future negotiations by voluntarily relinquishing his hereditary title to the throne of Lithuania.

However, from this time on this union began to weaken and in order to prevent disruption the Poles called a convention at Lublin in 1569. After this, these sharp disputes between the Poles and the Lithuanians partly disappeared, which in all probability was due to the fact that the Lithuanian princes and aristocrats began to mix more freely with the Poles and Gudai (inhabitants of White Russia) and also to assimilate their habits and customs. On the other hand the common people, up to the middle of the nineteenth century, were victims of a hard feudal system that existed at that time. To these common people credit must be given that the Lithuanian language and customs have survived. Secretly they practiced their old pagan religion so that almost half returned to the worship of their ancient Perun, a relapse due directly to the manner in which the Polish missionaries labored, namely, in

the Polish language instead of the Lithuanian. As time passed this union between the Poles and Lithuanians suffered severely from the exaggerated individualism of the Poles, which manifested itself in all departments of their government, and finally led Poland to anarchy. This condition also affected the Lithuanians whose princes and aristocrats had assimilated Polish habits and customs and had become Polonized. The hyphenated state became a kind of a confederated kingdom without any central administration and whose joint executive was a king whose power was paralyzed by diets, by government officers appointed for life, or by confederations organized in different provinces. This union did more evil than good to both states. The nobility of both thought of nothing but laying taxes on the people. Russia, Germany and Austria seeing the corrupt state of affairs determined to dismember Poland and Lithuania. The first partition took place on July 25, 1772, the second in 1792, and the third in 1795. By these three successive divisions, the greatest part of Lithuania was annexed to Russia, and the smaller part to Germany.

The nineteenth century brought many changes to the Lithuanians, now under the Russian government. In 1831 the Poles made an effort to regain their lost political liberty, which resulted in bloody and useless revolution. The Russian Ukase of 1849 forbade the use of the name of Lithuania which was to be replaced by that of north western country. Again in 1863 the Poles made a last and final political revolt, but as in 1831 their efforts were fruitless. The Lithuanian common folk were enticed to take part in these revolutions by empty promises, and as a result the seat of government at Vilna was occupied by the Russian Governor-General Mouravief (the Hanger); and the University at Vilna was removed to Kiev. Mouravief, in 1863, forbade the use of Lithuanian characters in all printed matter, from prayer-books to newspapers; and, in the following year, made such printing a crime. He also decreed that all books should be printed with Russian characters in order to accustom the people to adopt the Russian language and forget their own. This régime lasted forty years. The

Lithuanian literature was not allowed to live in Russia, so it sought a new home in Tilsit, (Lithuanian Germany), from whence books printed in Lithuanian characters were smuggled into Lithuania.

In 1904 a great revolution broke out in Russia. Fearing that the Lithuanians might join the revolution, Russia, in order to gain their good will, granted them the freedom of the press. Previous to this not only was the liberty of the press denied them, but all national movements, which tended to keep alive the national spirit and language, were forbidden and punished by banishment to Siberia. This severity had the most telling effect upon the Lithuanian people. Their sturdy sons left their birthplace for all corners of the globe; about a million coming to the United States of America. During the short period of ten years, (1904-1914), there was a remarkable growth of Lithuanian literature of permanent value, among which should be mentioned *Blunder*, by Dobilas, depicting the dawn of the new era; *Klaida*, (*Wrong*) by Lazdinu Peleda; *Sharunas*, by Vincent Kreve, authority on ancient heroes; and *Dainavos Salies Senu Zmoniu Padavimai*, by Vincent Kreve, Lithuanian life ably told. Among scientific works are, *Prakalba prie Lietuviu Kryziaus Albumo*, by Dr. Basanavichus and *Aisciu Studijos (The Studies of Aestii)*, by Buga. Besides there were organized many societies of education, as well as a scientific society to conduct searches of ancient tombs and burial places for the purpose of discovering the nature of ancient Lithuanian culture. Mention must be made of the Society of Fine Arts and the Prohibition Society, the former for developing the Lithuanian national style and the latter for saving the poor people from squandering their possessions to obtain vodka. The Lithuanians in America are keeping abreast of the intellectual movement, since at the present there are thirty-two Lithuanian publications published in the States, not to mention those in England, Canada, and South America.

Can old historic Poland be reunited? This is the question asked by everyone. To answer it requires the considering of the following three points:

Will the people of Poland favor it?

Will the people of Ukrainia favor it?

Will the people of Lithuania favor it?

1. The people of Poland proper care little about the dream of the older Polish propagandist: "morza do morza," meaning, "from sea to sea." Can any nation or Peace Conference grant Poland the right to extend from sea to sea and thus to step over other nations without due consideration?

2. The people of Ukrainia were hard pressed by the old Russian rule while the tyranny of the Pole is still fresh in their minds. The leading Ukrainians with one accord say that they are ready to govern themselves and will not unite with Poland.

3. The people of Lithuania know well the efforts of the Poles to rob them of their language. It seems absurd, still it is a fact, that they were told by their Polish Christian messengers that a pagan language is only understood by a pagan god and that the Lithuanians must have a language other than Lithuanian in order to please the Christian God. The Pole tells the world that Lithuania is but a province of Poland, and that there are no Lithuanians. The Pole can say what he likes, but there never has been a time when the Lithuanians as a race fell into oblivion, much less were swallowed by Poland. And as for the language, he can at any time hear plain Lithuanian spoken. Professor Meillet of the College de France, says:

If you wish to hear from human lips some echo of what the language originally common to the Indo-European may have been, go and listen to the Lithuanian peasants talking.

To the question whether the Lithuanians can govern themselves, we need only point to a dispatch from Japan of March last:

In Lithuania there has been formed a provisional government consisting of the following: A. Smetona, premier; P. Dovydailis, minister of education; J. Shaulys, minister of foreign affairs; M. Smilgevichus, minister of finances; M. Birzhishka, minister of justice; J. Vileisha, minister of public works; D. Malinauskas, minister of public safety. Dr. J. Szlupas, well known among the American Lithuanians, has been appointed envoy plenipotentiary

to the United States; J. Aukshtuolis, president of the Lithuanian committee in Stockholm, is made ambassador to the Scandinavian countries; M. Ychas, member of the last Russian Duma, ambassador to England and France; J. Gabrys, manager of the Lithuanian Information Bureau in Switzerland, Ambassador to the Central Powers. A national army is being organized. Lithuania's absolute neutrality was proclaimed. A political and economic treaty with Sweden was drafted.

And a further proof that the Lithuanians can govern themselves is the convention of 1800 Lithuanian delegates from all parts of the United States, comprising representative men of the nationality in this country, which was held in New York, March 13-14, 1918. Resolutions were adopted repeating the demand for absolute independence for Lithuania "as a sovereign and independent state within its own ethnographic boundaries."

And the following reasons for this action were urged:

(a) The Lithuanians are the aborigines of the territory they occupy.

(b) The Lithuanians rendered a service to Humanity by rescuing Civilization.

(c) There was no real union between Lithuania and Poland. At Lublin, a confederation was formed, against the will of the Lithuanian people. The King of Poland had no right to act at this conference as the Duke of Lithuania, because a year previous to this conference he had left the throne of Lithuania. The dismembering of Poland and Lithuania dissolved all ties, if any had existed.

(d) Russia never conquered Lithuania, but the Russian Czar used the title of Grand Duke of Lithuania, transferring it to others at coronation. The fall of Czar Nicholas II frees Lithuania. Lithuania's declaration of its independence by the State Council, and, later, the recognition of the independence by the German Government, although unsatisfactory, makes the question of Lithuania an international one, to be settled at the termination of the war.

(e) The Lithuanian active participation in this war by contributing about a million of her sturdy sons to the Allied Armies, and having a self-government, entitles her to a representation at the Peace Conference.

(f) The Lithuanians enduring severe oppressions and persecutions have established educational, political and economic institutions and are fully prepared for self-government.

In concluding Emmanuel Kant says:

Without taking into consideration the importance and the usefulness which the conservation of a nation possessing such good qualities can have on the country, one must again remark, that the antiquity and purity of the language of the Lithuanian people, at the present oppressed and encircled in a narrow space, almost isolated from other races, has a great importance for science (linguistic) and especially for the ancient history of the migration of races. This is therefore another reason why this race and their language should be preserved.